

Soft Drinks and School-Age Children

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Are Our Kids Drinking Too Much Soda?

Since the beginning of time, it seems that humans have had a sweet tooth. In the melodious voice of Mary Poppins (Julie Andrews), "A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down."

The problem today is that Americans are eating and drinking too many spoonfuls of sugar for good health. Based on USDA surveys, Americans now average 20.5 teaspoons of added sugar per day. That's 68.5 pounds per year. Added sugars are sugars and syrups added to foods and beverages in processing or preparation. This does not include the naturally occurring sugar in foods like fruit or milk.

In some age groups, sugar intake is even higher. U.S. teens (11 to 17 years old) consume a daily average of 15 teaspoons of sugar from soft drinks alone. This means 11 percent of teen calories come from carbonated beverages, or fruit-flavored, part juice and sports drinks. These empty calories lack the body-building nutrients, like the protein and calcium found in milk. Health experts also believe that soft drink calories are a major contributor to child and teen overweight, as well as expensive dental problems.

Non-diet soft drinks are the number-one source of added sugars in the U.S. A single can of regular soda contains 150 sugar calories. The 40 grams of sugar in 12 ounces of soda are equal to about 10 teaspoons of sugar. Consumers are often shocked when they realize that drinking a 32-ounce pop is basically the same as eating a half cup of table sugar.

Sugary foods and beverages become a health problem when they replace other more nutrient-dense choices. This is especially true for children and adolescents. When it comes to soft drinks, moderation means a can or less per day. Here are some things that we can do to guide our children.

- Help children learn to enjoy water as the thirst quencher of choice.
- Provide a variety of low-fat milks and 100% fruit and vegetable juices that are high in nutrients.
- Provide access to soft drinks as a "sometimes" beverage to be enjoyed in moderate amounts.
- Be a role model by drinking fewer soft drinks.

For more tips on making sensible sugar choices, check out USDA Food and Nutrition Information Center at <http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/>.